

SEARCHING THE CENSUS FOR THE BLUES

Revisiting Robert Johnson's death certificate

(With apologies to Blind Willie McTell)

by Bob Eagle

Sony's Centenary re-issue of Robert Johnson's songs has again piqued interest in Johnson's life and, seemingly, especially in his death. Way back when I first saw Johnson's death certificate, I wondered whether the informant, 'Jim Moore', may have been a mis-named member of the Moor (sic) planter family from the Delta. The nearest available census is from 1930 (the 1940 census is due to be made public next year). So, I searched for jam* jim* moor* (the asterisks enabling 'wild card' searching) in Leflore County (of which Greenwood is the county seat) in 1930. There were four results:

1. James Moore (wife Callie – indexed as "Collie"), aged 32, having married at 19: he was black, living in Beat 3, in Enumeration District 42-17. This district placed him near, but outside, Morgan City, southwest of Greenwood, and beyond Quito (pronounced "quit-toh" locally, and the location of one of Johnson's reported grave sites).
2. James Moore (son of Willie & Ruth), aged 19, single: again, he was black, living in Beat 2, in Enumeration District 42-5, 'west of Southern RR'. The district is in and near Schlater (pronounced like "slaughter" but with a "sh" sound at the beginning, for those of you unfamiliar with it).
3. James Moore (son of Bank President, C.C. Moore, and his wife Marie), aged 17, single, but white: living on Schley Street, Itta Bena, in Beat 4, and Enumeration District 42-12. If Moore was Moor, perhaps this was a member of the planter family.
4. Jimmie Moore (son of Lewis and Mary), aged 18, single: again, black, living in Beat 3, in Enumeration District 42-10. This district was in the vicinity of, but outside, Greenwood.

The broad subdivision of counties in Mississippi is into Beats, which may be regarded as 'wards' by analogy with those of a city. Unlike the counties, which seldom suffer boundary change, the Beats appear to frequently change, apparently so as to reflect approximately equal populations within the county for each county election. By further contrast, the Enumeration Districts exist only for the particular census, although they also are intended to embrace areas of approximately equal population. People of genealogical bent have reproduced the basic descriptions of each Enumeration District for certain census years, which enables us to identify near which town in a county an individual – often rural in 1930 - may have lived.

The challenge, then, was to see if any of these four could plausibly be the informant. Of course, in the eight years between the census and Johnson's death, some or all could have moved, and possibly other 'Jim Moore' possibilities could have moved into the county, but that sort of investigation would have to wait until the 1940 census is revealed.

The death certificate spoke of 'Zion Church' as being involved in the burial. Steve LaVere had long thought it was a reference to Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church, an old, tiny, timber building on the Money Road, close by the Tallahatchie River, in the country fields several miles north from Greenwood.

In 2000, an 85-year-old lady named Rosie Eskridge was interviewed, and pointed out Johnson's grave, which she said had been dug by her husband, gravedigger Tom Eskridge, in the cemetery alongside Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church. Was this just another false lead, as it was expected that the other reported grave sites may have been?

Assuming a birth year of 1915 for Rosie, the chances were that she may have died in the past decade.

An internet search revealed that Rosetta "Rosie" Eskridge died of heart failure in Greenwood Leflore Hospital on 22nd June 2006. Her services were held at Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church, where she had been "an active member and mother".

The obituary in the Greenwood Commonwealth newspaper failed to mention her parents or her maiden name, but it mentioned her

surviving siblings: "sisters, Mary Walker of Evansville, Ind., Annie Adams of Mobile, Ala., and Doris Strong of Clarksdale; and a brother, Felix Hardy of Memphis, Tenn." The official double-letter state code – respectively, in this case, IN, AL, MS and TN – is obviously making hard weather against the older, informal traditions.

Returning to the 1930 census, one Felix Hardy, aged five, was listed in Leflore County with his parents, Frank and Francis (sic), and his siblings, Rosie, Frank Jr., Mary, Doshie, (Felix) and Annie. On the assumption that Doshie was a pet name for Doris, the names fitted Mrs. Eskridge's family, and suggested that she had been born Rosie Hardy.

But the most striking thing about the census page was the names of the members of the family counted immediately before the Hardys - Lewis Moore, his wife Mary, and their children Jimmie, Ed, Fannie, Minerva and Claudie. In 1930, Rosie lived next door to one of the census candidates for the informant, "Jim Moore"!

It would be tidy to report that Tom Eskridge also lived nearby in 1930 but the nearest man listed of similar name was Tom Eskridge (aged 29) at Duck Hill, Montgomery County.

District 42-10 contains 85 image pages of listings, with 50 people listed per image, so more than 4,000 people were enumerated there in 1930, apparently covering a considerable rural area.

Working on the assumption that the whites on a plantation would be counted first, I paged back to the nearest white listings. They were for the families of managers James Easter (41 in 1930) and James Johnson (47) – both renting - and that of farmer Fred Wagner (41), a property owner whose real estate was shown as being worth \$12,000, a considerable sum for a rural property at the time.

Rosie Eskridge had stated that Reverend Stark presided at Johnson's funeral. The only likely candidate in 1930 is Mallie Stark, male, aged 27 in 1930, who had been born in Georgia and who was enumerated in Enumeration District 42-4, Beat 2, Leflore County, Mississippi in 1930, in or near Schlater. Roley Starke, the only man of similar family name, lived at Swiftown, further south even than Morgan City. Perhaps the 1940 census will reveal another, better, candidate for 'Reverend Stark'.

Rosie had said that Johnson had died on the Starwood Plantation, the name of which has not turned up in any Internet search. Some people equate it somehow with 'Star of the West', a Civil War hulk that was scuttled in 1863 in the Tallahatchie River near Fort Pemberton, in order to stop the Yankee boats proceeding south to the Yazoo River. Fort Pemberton is near Three Forks, reputed site of Robert Johnson's 'poisoning'.

The 1930 census shows that there were 389 individuals (371 black) and 108 families (105 black) on Fred Wagner's plantation as of 1930. These do not appear to be unusual ratios. Willis Burch Brumfield (1942-2010), the Chancery Clerk of Leflore County while the Johnson Estate was being litigated, recalled that his father managed a plantation out from Inverness in the 1950s where Willis' family was the only white family, along with 88 black families. Apparently not much had changed, despite the increasing replacement of mules by tractors. (I recall several occasions during the 1990s when Willis reported attending funerals for black school chums who had died – and I was in Mississippi only rarely.)

Incidentally, Brumfield said that the Three Forks store was frequented by white patrons (who did not use the name "Three Forks" for it) and that the land on which it stood was owned by the McLemore family. (This further undermines the story about Johnson being poisoned at the Three Forks juke.) One Albert H. McLemore (42) was a Greenwood cotton buyer as of 1930. Greenwood is still a major cotton market, so the chances are that McLemore was very wealthy.

Where does this leave us? 'Jim Moore's' knowledge of Johnson, scant as it is, seems too detailed and specific for 'Jim Moore' to be white. The white James Moore (who was also in Itta Bena in 1920, with the same parents as in 1930), seems not to be a member of the Moor planter family. His name was spelled 'Moore' in both 1920 and 1930.

There seems to be nothing to connect James Moore of near Morgan City with Johnson, other than the fact that James Moore can be shortened to Jim Moore. The James Moore of Schlater is perhaps more likely, in light of the putative preacher, Reverend Stark being from there, but he lacks the immediacy of "Jimmie Moore" with Rosie Hardy Eskridge.

The proximity in 1930 of Moore and Rosie Hardy strongly suggests that they lived close together and, as Rosie was (by no later than 1938) close to the Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church, it is likely that in 1938 they were both close to that church. It is unclear whether the Wagner plantation was on the left bank (as was Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church) or right bank of the Tallahatchie River, but I'm prepared to believe that they were on the left bank.

Subject to confirmation from the 1940 census next year, it is looking likely that both 'Jim Moore' and Rosie Eskridge were involved with the Little Zion Missionary Baptist Church at about the time of Johnson's death, and that the grave site that Rosie pointed out at the church may well be Robert's.

Label shot: B&R Archive.

